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AUTHOR Quastler, I. E.
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ABSTRACT

Participant qualifications, activities, program objectives, and benefits to participants and sponsors of geography internship programs at American colleges and universities are assessed. The major purpose of the paper is to provide insights about internship programs to potential program directors and student interns. In the area of grade requirements, the paper stresses the importance of student motivation and perceived maturity over grade point average. With regard to pay for interns, the paper suggests that units of credit and job experience provided by an internship are adequate compensation for the approximately 180 hours of work and that no additional pay should be offered. Concerning acceptable job assignments for interns, the recommendation is that experiences should be practical, on-site rather than in the library or at home, lead potentially to a full-time job, and be monitored closely by a faculty member and/or an employer. To evaluate the success of an internship program, a director should consider impact on the student and the departmental education program, time and effort expended by student, faculty, and employer, and the probability that the internship will lead to permanent employment. (DB)

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BENEFITS AND PROBLEMS OF A GEOGRAPHY INTERNSHIP PROGRAM: SOME OBSERVATIONS.

I. E. Quastler
San Diego State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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BENEFITS AND PROBLEMS OF A GEOGRAPHY INTERNSHIP PROGRAM: SOME OBSERVATIONS

I. E. Quastler
San Diego State University

The past decade has seen the establishment of geography internship programs in many parts of the nation, and these have been described in several journal articles and papers. One of the oldest such programs was started at San Diego State University in 1970; for the past two years it has been my privilege to serve as its director. It is not my intention here to describe this program, for that has been done elsewhere. Rather, my objective is to share some of the insights that I have gained during the past two years that may be useful both for potential directors of such programs and for future student interns. What follows is, I believe, very much a common sense discussion of the type of questions that often need to be answered in the operation of a geography internship program.*

It may be appropriate to start by making some comments about the desired qualifications for student applicants. This is important, for it is the students that are the primary producers of the image of the program, and a positive image obviously is important in assuring a continued availability of openings for interns. At SDSU we require, according to the catalogue, that a student have at least a "B" average. In practice, however, I have found it highly desirable to be flexible about this requirement. While such a grade

*During the question and answer part of the session at the Philadelphia meetings, where this paper was presented, it became obvious to me how greatly the details of the internship program are influenced by the particulars of the university setting. At SDSU I have been given almost total leeway in running this program, and my paper reflects this condition. Compared to other campuses, the SDSU internship program is relatively informally administered, i.e., almost all questions such as student eligibility, educational appropriateness of the intern position, and qualifications of supervisors are entrusted to the judgment of the internship director.

point average can be used to eliminate students who would not do the program any good, it should by no means be applied uniformly. I believe that motivation and perceived maturity are far more important characteristics than the grade point average in accounting for success; that is, I believe that intern directors should be willing to trade off these characteristics for grade point deficiencies, at least within some acceptable limits. Since motivation and maturity can only be judged subjectively, I believe that a director should feel free to make that kind of judgement. It seems to me that the grade point is especially meaningless for those students who did poorly as freshmen and sophomores, perhaps before they found a satisfactory major or personal motivation. A grade point average may also not be a very useful measure of ability for those many students who may have to put in much energy to support themselves.

In a similar vein, what characteristics do employers of interns seem to evaluate most highly in student interns? Of course, there are a few who look for specific skills, such as cartography or quantitative methods; the majority, however, are simply looking for good material for on-the-job training. Some characteristics that they value highly, it seems to me, are reliability, enthusiasm, a willingness to learn, and people who operate well in office situations. This is not to deny, of course, that ability to learn quickly is unimportant, but it certainly is not enough, and often is not the most important criterion.

One question that comes up regularly is whether interns should be paid, or even whether pay should be allowed when offered. This is especially an issue at my university, where so many students are working their way through college. Although we do not totally disallow pay for interns, it is discouraged, and I believe for a very good reason. Most important, it seems to me that if the student is willing to give free help, the company or agency logically should

be willing to make some effort to provide interesting, varied and challenging work. Such a trade-off should be made quite explicit, I believe, for otherwise there is a tendency to use new help in relatively menial jobs. It is also my judgement that the three units of credit and job experience provided by the internship are adequate compensation for the 12 hours per week that the student puts in. Finally, of course, it is also true that many companies and agencies simply would not find it worthwhile to spend time with interns if they also had to provide pay.

Because of the varied requirements of a large population of majors, I am often faced with the need to establish new intern positions. How do I go about presenting the program to a potential employer? After being put into contact with the right person, who is often a vice-president or a section head, I give a quick overview of our program. Going via the personnel department should be avoided, if possible, for that usually only leads to an additional step in the process that does not involve the person making the final decision on whether to take on an intern. Of course, I do stress the possible benefits that can accrue from obtaining free help; however, I also feel that a successful internship ultimately must be beneficial to all parties involved. Certainly I do not believe that an internship should be established with a firm that feels that it is doing you a favor. If the contact does show some interest, I always stress that they certainly have an opportunity to reject the student should they feel that the person is not suited to the position. This is accomplished by arranging for an interview, after which both the potential employer and the student can pull out gracefully should they feel that the arrangement would not be beneficial. In practice, since the students and job descriptions are matched closely before the interview, this veto power is seldom exercised by either party.

Another important and common question involves what constitutes an acceptable job assignment for interns. It seems to me that to answer this question requires that one have a fairly strong philosophy on the objectives of an internship program. My view is that internships should be devoted to practical, on-site experiences that can be helpful in leading to a full-time job. This implies that interns should have easy access to supervisors who will give some direction. In my experience, a fair number of potential employers have been interested in receiving help from interns, but either because of a lack of space in the office or a desire to give a minimum of supervision, they have asked that the students do the work at home or in libraries. The work involved may be interesting to the student and quite educational, but such work should be done under the heading of independent research in conjunction with a faculty member.

Along similar lines, the appropriate amount of time that a student should spend on the internship sometimes comes into question. This is especially a problem for the approximately one-third of our students who take the internship during the summer. The total on-job time required for credit is 180 hours, which is normally accumulated by working 12 hours per week during a 15-week semester. In the summer, however, some students would prefer to put in their 180 hours by working for four and a half weeks full time, or for nine weeks at half time. In the past, I have not allowed them to work full time, and generally discouraged working for more than 15 hours per week. This rule is based on the reasonable assumption that a longer time on the job will usually lead to more varied work assignments and therefore more valuable experience.

After an internship program has been operating for some time, inevitably the question of its success or failure must be faced. I would measure success or failure primarily in terms of its impact on the students and the departmental educational program, weighted against the time and effort that must be put

into it by the faculty. Of course, there is no absolute answer to this question, but for several reasons I would judge the program at San Diego State University to be a big success. I handle both the graduate and undergraduates; the total departmental input is one quarter of a faculty position. In return for this input, there are a number of important payoffs. For students some of these include more knowledge of job opportunities in geography, greater salability after graduation, making various "contacts" on the job, and usually a greater knowledge about some relevant aspect of the San Diego region. From the point of view of the department, the program has been useful in attracting new students both from other majors on the campus and from other parts of California. As the undergraduate adviser who often speaks to potential majors, I find that the internship is very useful in generating interest in our program and recent internship positions are a good way to tell students about concrete job opportunities within geography. On a more personal note, however, I feel that the single biggest benefit of the internship is to see the increased self-confidence and the considerable personal growth that usually comes from participating in the program.

In my opinion another measure of success is to enumerate how often the internship has led, directly or indirectly, to permanent employment. Taking those students who had interned in the summer of 1978 as a sample group, by the following fall more than half had a full- or part-time job that stemmed directly from the internship. Overall, it appears that perhaps 75 percent of our former interns eventually get jobs because of their intern experience. More generally, the experience that can be put on a personal data sheet because of the internship seems to give our students an important competitive edge in finding their first position after graduation. Admittedly based on limited and partially impressionistic data, it appears that proportionately

far fewer of our non-intern graduates eventually work in an area that can be considered as related to geography.

Some final observations concern the types of jobs that appear to be most promising for majors at this time; these observations are based on my contacts with the job market through the internship program. My comments apply most directly to the San Diego and California job market, but I assume that they are at least partially representative of the situation in the rest of the country. I must say that I was very worried about job prospects for our graduates after the passage of Proposition 13 last year, for many majors had been entering the public sector (especially urban and environmental planning). In retrospect, the impact was not as bad as I had feared, for while opportunities in the public sector are dim, they seem better than ever with private concerns. In the San Diego area these general opportunities are reinforced by the fact that quite a number of our former students are now working with various private firms. It is important to realize that the passage of Proposition 13 did not change the environmental or planning laws for the state, and that such work therefore still has to be carried out. When the various governmental agencies find they do not have the personnel to do all the required tasks, these days they often award contracts to the private sector. In addition, cartography continues to be a very saleable skill; the department could probably find jobs for twice as many cartography specialists as it is graduating every year. In transportation planning, the prospects are also quite good, both because many "Caltrans" employees are now reaching retirement age and because of a recent directive that more people from the social sciences (in contrast to engineers) will be hired in the future. In the past few months, two of our B.A. graduates have been hired by that agency. In contrast, the formerly important job market that can be labelled "general urban planning" is not very promising at this time.

At this point, I should perhaps add that in my position as intern director, I have begun increasingly to act as an informal job placement person for the department. More and more I find, in about the last year, that people call me to ask whether I know of any graduates (or students) who may be interested in applying for a certain position. This is a not unexpected result, because as internship director one does become relatively well known to many people who may be in a position to hire.

As a final remark, I would like to say that I believe that an internship program could be a useful addition to most departments. Not only does such a program often enrich the educational experience of students, but it also gives one's graduates a competitive edge in the job market (often in competition with students from other disciplines), and it makes nongeographers in government agencies and private firms aware of the potential contribution of the geographer.